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Abstract

Universities present themselves as meritocratic organisations. There is evidence that such claims are 'rationalised myths' (Nielsen, 2016). This article is concerned with the perceived effect of micropolitics on academic careers in two case study universities: a collegial Spanish and managerial Irish one. The data is drawn from eighty-six semi-structured interviews with academics (43 from each context). The focus is on two aspects of micropolitics: those related to career experiences, particularly networks; and those related to the evaluation of candidates, particularly double standards. Research results show that informal social networks are perceived to facilitate career progression; and these are particularly referred to by the Spanish male respondents. Double standards in evaluation are used to favour specific candidates: local ones in the Spanish case; men in the Irish case. Men in the Spanish context refer more openly than their Irish counterparts to them, arguably reflecting the strength of discourses other than merit in that context. The results suggest that the informal structure influences the formal structure regardless of the governance model, which raises fundamental questions about the nature of universities and the limitations of structural changes.

Key words

Meritocracy, micropolitics; case study, universities, Irish, Spanish

Introduction

Universities present themselves as meritocratic. In Scully's (1997: 413) terms a meritocratic system is a social system in which merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards. Implicit in this is the idea that merit is unambiguous and that rewards accrue to individuals based on it (Nielsen, 2016). The objective assessment of merit is seen as particularly important in public universities in

the context of issues related to public accountability and transparency. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012: 508) point out that meritocracy in universities is reflected in the concept of excellence, which encourages the highest level of academic achievement and has become the 'holy grail' of the university. However, studies focused on gender, race or class inequalities increasingly question that supposed meritocracy (Nielsen, 2016; O'Connor and O'Hagan, 2016; van Den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Indeed Nielsen (2016) argues that meritocracy is little more than a 'rationalized myth'. O'Connor and O'Hagan (2016), citing Hallett (2010: 54), point out that this myth is particularly important in universities, where 'success depends on legitimacy acquired from conformity to macro-cultural myths'.

Universities, like other organisations, have a clearly defined formal structure formed by a set of elements, systematically organized to achieve certain goals but at the same time, they also have an informal structure formed by multiple substructures, as many informal groups exist within the organization. The focus on formal structures obscures the informal structure and presents the institution as independent of the people who work in it and of their priorities and relationships (Infestas, 1993). The informal structure is not apparent from a description of the formal structure. It is only revealed through the daily practices, relationships and behaviours of members of the institution (Ball, 1987; Benschop, 2009; Infestas, 1993; Molina, 2001; Morley, 2000; White, 1986). By focusing on that informal structure and analysing it we can discover 'power operating in structures of thinking and behaviour that previously seemed devoid of power relations' (White, 1986: 421). The model underpinning this perception of universities has been referred to as the political model (Baldrige, 1971). In it universities are seen as characterised by conflict between competing groups. This model is a way of understanding the non-rule oriented process of decision making (Pusser, 2003). There is a tension between the depiction of universities as unambiguously objective and meritocratic (i.e. the bureaucratic model) or as characterised by competing groups (i.e. the political model).

Morley (2000: 232) points out that 'The exercising of power in organizations can be overt and identifiable but also subtle, complex, and confusing' and that the micropolitical perspective allows us to observe how power is enacted. Thus, 'Micropolitics focuses on the ways in which power is relayed in everyday practices' (Morley, 2000: 232). In the

words of Benschop (2009: 222-223), social networks and micropolitical processes 'reproduce and constitute power in action in everyday organizational life'.

Focusing on this concept, Morley (2000: 233) indicates that micropolitics: 'is about relationships rather than about structures; about knowledge rather than about information; about skills rather than about positions; about talk rather than about paper'. Blase (1991: 1) also suggests that micropolitics is about inclusion as well as exclusion. It is:

About power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about co-operation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends.

Micropolitics has been seen as involving 'intrigue, subterfuge and a rackety underworld of scams and plots' (MacKenzie-Davey, 2008: 667). This 'organizational underworld' is recognised by participants (Hoyle, 1982: 87, cited in Morley 2000). It is characterized by coalitions, alliances, political and personal strategic actions and also by tensions and power imbalances. It consists of power relationships that act in subtle and sophisticated ways and that are reflected in the everyday practices of organizations (Morley, 2000). It can be seen as political behaviour which simply gets things done (Winkler, 2010). However, in this article it is seen in more problematic terms in the context of an underlying model of stealth power i.e. power which although manifest at a micro -level, draws on underlying structural sources (Webb, 2008). In this perspective, the negotiation of power which occurs in micro-politics is influenced by wider societal and/or organisational power bases.

This article looks at the (perceived) existence and impact of micropolitics in case studies of two contrasting university systems: a collegial Spanish university and a managerial Irish university. Research results show that micropolitics is a central part of the negotiations which occur in a political model underpinned by the enactment of stealth power in a context where bureaucratic processes serve as a public face of university practice. The focus of the article is on micro-politics in general: with gender being as an example of micropolitics in action in informal networks, and gender and inbreeding being examples of the enactment of micropolitics in evaluation.

Context

This article draws on data from two different countries: Spain and Ireland. In both countries a permanent academic hierarchy exists in the university system, consisting of lecturer; senior lecturer; associate professor and full professor. However, there are also clear differences. The Spanish system is characterized by collegiality, the traditional model in universities, involving governance 'by a community of scholars, as opposed to a central managerial authority' (Meek, 2002: 254). In the case study Spanish university, governance, decision making, control and coordination bodies (Governing Body, University Senate, Social Council, Faculty Boards, Department Council, etc.) involve representatives of the whole university community, that is, teaching and research staff, administrative and service staff and students. They elect the Rector of the university (who appoints the members of the executive team i.e. several Vice-rectors, the General Secretary and the Manager of the university). The Deans of the different faculties are elected by the members of the Faculty Board (where all sectors of the faculty are represented) and the Heads of the Department are elected by each Department Council (where all sectors are also represented).

The Governing Body is headed by the Rector of the university and composed of the executive team and members representing all sectors of the university community. This body is responsible for establishing a staffing policy that determines the existence and location of new vacancies. The general criteria used to evaluate applications for positions at each level are determined by this representative body. The Departmental Council is responsible for deciding the job specification of the vacancy and choosing the committee which will evaluate the applications, with these decisions being ratified by Governing Body. The composition of the committee varies depending on the level of the vacancy. All committees are formed by five members, with the exception of those dealing with lecturer vacancies, which include seven members: the Rector, the Dean, the Head of the Department, three members of the department and a representative of the Works Council (the representative body for teaching staff and researchers below the position of associate/full professor). A promotion system in which only internal candidates can compete does not exist. In the collegial case study Spanish university, relationships with colleagues in general and departmental colleagues in particular are vital, and thus it is a particularly fertile ground for micropolitics.

The Irish system is mainly characterized by a managerial system, and this is particularly so in the case study university. In that university, the President (equivalent to the Rector in the Spanish system) is appointed by Governing Authority and he in turn appoints the Vice Presidents and Faculty Deans. Although representative bodies exist (such as Academic Council, Governing Authority; Faculty Management Committee; Faculty Board, etc.) executive power is concentrated in the President, with the executive team he/she chooses being largely advisory. Governing Authority has the power to appoint and if necessary to dismiss the President. However, on a day-to-day basis, particularly as regards appointments and promotions, Governing Authority chaired by an external Chancellor, simply endorses the recommendations made to it by interview/promotion boards, and ultimately by the President.

The Irish case study university is a 'new university' having achieved university status in the latter part of the last century. The permanent academic hierarchy is similar to the Spanish one, with a positional hierarchy from lecturer to full professor. Decisions as regards the overall allocation of posts between faculties are made by a sub-committee of executive committee chaired by the Vice President Academic and Registrar, who has been appointed by the President. The Deans, who are also appointed by the President, are responsible for ensuring that recruitment advertisements and the criteria to evaluate applicants are drafted. In practice this is typically done by the relevant Head of Department, who is ultimately appointed by the Dean, and he/she also typically identifies the recruitment panel and the evaluative criteria, which are signed off by the Dean. Hence, there are similarities to the Spanish context. However, in the Irish case study, totally open recruitment procedures, potentially attracting external candidates, largely occur only at the very beginning of the academic career (lecturer level) and at the very end (full professorial level). Hence, the range of appointments over which the Head of Department has effective control is limited. Movement between the lecturer and associate professor level inclusive is ultimately determined by large promotion committees (11-14 members) with very limited representation from any one department. Depending on the level of the position, these promotion boards are chaired either by the President or the Vice President Academic and Registrar. Applicants are evaluated on a range of indicators across the areas of research, teaching and service (X and X, 2016). Hence, in the Irish case study

university, there is an attempt to ensure that the impact of personal contacts, particularly at departmental level, is limited by these promotion boards.

The Irish and Spanish case study universities are characterised by two contrasting management systems but principles related to transparency, equality and merit are assumed to underpin appointments/promotions in both contexts. However, the interviewees suggest that the perception is that practices that violate these principles exist and are seen as crucially important in affecting career outcomes.

Methodology

The research in the Irish and Spanish case study universities was undertaken as part of wider research projects on higher education, focusing particularly on gender. In both cases the research design involved organisational case studies. Case study research facilitates investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, and it offers the opportunity to understand a phenomenon in depth. The disadvantage of case study research is that it is difficult to generalize findings beyond these specific organizational contexts.

The studies were undertaken separately. Furthermore, the data is not entirely comparable since the Irish data, unlike the Spanish one, was specifically concerned with women's underrepresentation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). The Spanish research was concerned with career trajectories, work-life balance, and gender differences in work and career paths across all disciplines. Both studies were concerned with the position of women in academia; both included men and women, and used a broadly similar methodology. Hence it seemed worthwhile to attempt a comparative analysis with some methodological caveats.

The Irish data in this article emerged from two interview sources: firstly, research on the career trajectories of those at different levels of the hierarchy in STEM, and secondly research on constructions of excellence. The former involved twenty-nine people (eighteen men and eleven women) selected by random sampling from those at early, mid and senior levels, using an on-line, random sequence generator. The second source drew on interviews with a purposive sample of fourteen respondents (seven men and seven women) involved in evaluative activities either as candidates or as board members.

Micropolitics was not a specific focus but emerged spontaneously in the Irish study in responses to a variety of questions e.g. ‘Has gender affected your career progression in a positive or negative way?’; ‘When you look back over your career what do you see as the critical points?’. The total number of respondents included in this article from the Irish study was forty-three respondents (twenty-five women and eighteen men).

The Spanish data is also derived from forty-three interviews with academics at early; middle and senior levels (twenty-two women and twenty-one men). As in the Irish study, micropolitics was not a specific focus but emerged spontaneously in replies to questions such as: ‘What have been the most decisive moments in your career?’; ‘Is there any difference in the careers of men and women in the university?’.

A critical realist approach (Scambler, 2001) was adopted in both studies. It denies that we can have any objective or certain knowledge of the world, and accepts the possibility of alternative valid accounts of phenomena (Maxwell, 2012). Thus, the focus is on respondents’ perceptions. Interviews facilitate an understanding of the depth and complexity of people’s accounts. In both studies the methodology was processual and reflexive, in the grounded theory tradition. Pseudonyms are used and in the interests of confidentiality, identifying information (such as position) are not included. Hence, respondents are only identified as from the Irish or Spanish university (IE and ES); as man/woman; and with a unique identifier number (starting 00) in each case study context.

Qualitative research aims to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data. In both studies interviews averaged one hour and were tape recorded and transcribed. The Spanish study analysed the interviews using the computer software program Atlas.ti to systemize, code, compare and explore the data. Coding was conducted in two phases. In the first one, based on deduction, the coding frame was made using a list of categories and codes derived from a review of literature. The second coding was inductive with new codes not previously contemplated being added. Concepts related to micropolitics emerged in this second part of the process. The Irish study was undertaken as part of a wider cross-national research project, where language constraints made it impossible to use a computer software programme in the analysis of the data. Hence content analysis was used to analyse the interview data because it is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Weber, 1990). Each unit of

analysis was a word or piece of text from the interview transcripts. These were sorted into emergent categories and themes, and then into meaningful clusters for analysis. A coding map was developed, linking codes to categories, clusters and themes. Micropolitics was not part of the initial coding framework, but emerged inductively in the Irish context.

In summary, the article draws on two case studies of universities in different contexts, and with contrasting management systems. In both cases the perception that micropolitics existed and had an important impact on peoples's careers emerged unexpectedly.

Micropolitics: a reality?

The similarities in the two universities as regards the existence and importance of micropolitics is striking. In the Irish study the respondent below suggests that informal power is an inevitable part of organizational life:

Because an organisation is made up of people [it] gets captured by people with their own agendas. Whether that's the president sort of saying well I'm going to push medicine and education and health sciences and this and that and whether it's the perceived or real rivalries between different departments in our faculty for instance and there's a sort of ongoing battle you know for resources and supremacy.... Yeah so that's, that's the problem always with organisations really. It's all politics (IE, woman, 40).

Spanish respondents are even more likely than their Irish counterparts to refer overtly to the impact of micropolitics on the recruitment of staff, and to see this as serving a protective purpose for the in-group:

In our university the best, the most qualified person will not always be who is going to get promoted... Moreover I think promoting people not so good as others sometimes has the strategic purpose of creating a group that do not outshine our group or creating an easily manipulated group (ES, man, 30).

For Owen-Smith and Powell (2008: 616) informal relationships are both 'the pipes through which resources circulate and the prisms that observers use to make sense of action'. Hence, two subtopics have been identified within micropolitics in both contexts: those related to career related experiences focusing particularly on networks including sponsors; and those around the evaluation of candidates focusing particularly on double

standards and the processes used to favour particular candidates. These are analytical distinctions and they are both seen as part of the single phenomenon of micropolitics.

Micropolitics related to career experiences: informal networks including sponsors

Universities can be seen as bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations in Weberian (1947) terms. However, this focus on the explicit official written rules that apply to the conduct of all members of the organization ignores the informal structure and culture which emerges in and around it. The formal structure promotes the emergence of social networks. Social support, shared values, information exchange, improved performance and career benefits emerge from/through interaction among the members (Benschop, 2009: 219). Thus, social networks, which can include sponsors, play an important role in advancing one's professional career and can become a powerful career accelerator. For instance, having many contacts and/or powerful sponsors favours the dissemination of one's own work since if people know others personally, they are more likely to cite them in their research or to invite them to be involved in new projects or to co-author articles (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). However, it is not easy to see the informal networks in organizations as they are not visible in the formal structure. The following quote highlights the invisibility of social networks and the effect of them on the functioning of the formal structure: 'It is quite common to find those kinds of invisible networks although we have to rummage to see them. They are the networks that empower certain people over others, that is for sure' (ES, man, 30).

Informal networks affect the formal structure because decisions made in the informal environment impact in the workplace, affecting the career paths of people in two different ways: firstly, they facilitate the trajectories of those who are part of powerful networks (they provide members with opportunities that permit them to progress and be promoted in their careers) and secondly, they inhibit the careers of those who are not part of these networks. The following interviewee highlights the importance of these informal networks, referring to them as: 'the central element for all. People who are good, work, research... promotion is easier for them if they are part of networks. But promotion without networks is complicated' (ES, man, 33). Other respondents in the Spanish study emphasize that it is not possible to be promoted in the academic career structure without

the support of social networks: ‘We all need opportunities. Anyone who says they have achieved something for themselves, I think they are deceiving themselves. Of course you need your effort, and the merits are yours, but everybody needs opportunities (ES, woman, 03). Such opportunities are seen as being created by social networks. Participation in such networks can be seen as involving ‘aspirational networking’, that is, managing relationships as a means to achieve academic promotion (Benschop, 2009). There are plenty of examples in the interviews indicating the (perceived) importance of informal networks and their effect on career advancement.

In the Spanish university, the procedures underline the importance of informal relationships with powerful others at departmental level. The interviewees from that university agree that the absence of such ties, regardless of the system can block the career of someone brilliant and encourage the careers of people who are less brilliant: ‘I have known many kinds of selection procedures, they have changed with the passage of the time, but they have always depended on those [informal ties] and now too’ (ES, man, 33). Irish respondents refer to the strategy of ‘paying forward’ i.e. doing favours for those in authority, on the assumption that these acts of loyalty and helpfulness will be repaid and will facilitate their own promotion:

And in the promotion game you always need somebody on the other side of the fence.... It’s a promotion competition. If you’ve nobody on the other side of the table fighting your case, you’ve no chance... You arrange [that]..., through [favours], you know. Well, no you may just have a feeling that, you know, Johnny will support or Mary will support... Because you’ve been doing stuff [with them] and you know they’re signing off on project applications or they know a bit about your publication record, or you’ve gone and presented to industry or some [other activity], you know and when they pick up the phone and ask you to do something, you do it. And you do it not just once you might do it fifty times. So, when your application goes in you’d expect them to support you. So, they do reward [your work] (IE, man, 23).

Both the respondents in the Spanish and Irish universities note the importance of sponsor relationships with power holders who are sitting on appointment boards. Thus, although it is recognized that it is necessary to meet the relevant criteria, they are also very aware of the importance of having a sponsor, someone powerful who uses their influence to advocate and create opportunities for their protégés (Ibarra et al., 2010): ‘Making your network is so important but you also need a supervisor there to help you, I

think that's important' (IE, women, 19). The importance of the influence that person has within the wider university context is also recognised in the Spanish context:

It depends on one hand, obviously, on the qualifications of the candidate, but it also depends in part on the influence that your immediate superior has in the university... on the relationship you have, your boss has within the University, that certainly (ES, man, 27).

The micropolitics involved in choosing a sufficiently powerful sponsor are particularly clearly articulated by the Spanish respondents. As they see it, this person could help their protégé to be promoted in their academic career or to achieve a job in the university, by effectively acting as a sponsor (Ibarra et al., 2010) and creating opportunities for them. Thus, sponsors are seen as an important career accelerator (Cameron and Blackburn, 1981; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012):

The academic career is very difficult to be neutral. Once you enter college you need someone to bet on you. Even if you are good at research, you need one person in the higher ranks of university, preferably full Professors, who bet on you and accept to be your supervisor... You can aspire to defend a doctoral thesis and have a PhD degree but to make an academic career, apart from your work and effort, you need to be helped by someone, someone who knocks on doors to open them. If nobody helps you, you do not go a step alone on that staircase. This is a career that is made with the help of another person (ES, woman, 09).

Several times the word 'godfather' appears in the Spanish study referring to sponsors i.e. those who had a very strong influence on creating career opportunities for their protégés. This figure often is the PhD supervisor and that relationship continue to be important throughout their academic careers. Similar references to PhD supervisors are made by respondents in the Irish case study: 'I still work together with him and on projects and PhD students, so yeah. He certainly has played a very big role in my career choices' (IE, man, 43). However, respondents in both contexts also point out that other people in formal positions can have a strong influence on a career because they can help in different ways: for instance, in the preparation of research proposals, in achieving a management position, or facilitating research and publications.

On the other hand, not having the support of powerful people or not being part of social networks is seen to have a negative effect on people's careers. For instance, this woman explains that a full professor helped her by providing opportunities for ten years, until she

decided to apply for a management vacancy without his consent. Since that act of self-assertion, his actions have been unhelpful to her career:

For ten years he gave me opportunities that my colleagues did not have. I benefited and I appreciate that. I am very grateful to everyone who helped me. Now, at the time that this changes... the dark side of the force falls on me (ES, women, 16).

Hence at both positive and negative levels, and particularly among the men, micropolitics and its consequences is much more overt in the Spanish case study.

Both the Irish and Spanish respondents emphasise that spending time outside work with colleagues or superiors (for instance: having lunch or dinner, having a drink, playing or watching sports, etc.) is positive for a career: 'All that playing golf at the weekends, it certainly does help... networking, networking on the golf course' (IE, woman, 01). However, some interviewees also refer to patterns of integration in such networks being differentiated by gender, that is, homosociability exists: the preference for people like oneself. Thus, men tend to socialize with other men and women with other women, which has been widely identified as an important process that perpetuates gender patterns and has effects in the workplace (Benschop, 2009; Grummell et al., 2009; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). The gendered homosocial character of these networks is also occasionally recognised by Irish men:

Guys tend to group together. They tend to form teams. It's something that's, I think it's natural in guys to do that... and in the process of doing that, if you're not on the team, you're outside the team. And there could be, not a, not if you like an overt gender bias, but there could be an implicit one on that basis (IE, man, 02).

The interviewees point out that the lower participation of women in these leisure spaces has implications for the development of their careers since important decisions are made in these social spaces:

To compete with men, one has to use the same weapons as men: you have to be at the drink hour, at the coffee hour, at the beer hour. No! I finish work, see you colleagues! I have to go to bathe children, read them stories. The time that you go to bathe children is when they distribute power positions (ES, woman, 09).

Women's absence from such spaces has implications since if a person has to choose someone to work with them, for example, in a management team, they will choose people

whom they trust and trust people whom they know. Trust involves a subjective element, often reflecting previous interactions or contacts (ETAN, 2000) and these are typically gendered:

Here, at the University, you are in contact with many people... your circle, you get along well with more boys than girls, because, because you are a boy. It is the same as girls. Then, maybe when it comes to choosing the Head of the Department, you are in contact with people who you know that are going to work well, you know them (ES, man, 26).

In summary, interviewees in both the Irish and Spanish universities see informal social networks as affecting the formal structure of their organizations. Thus, while their existence facilitates professional development, their absence hinders the careers of those who are excluded from them. The Spanish male respondents are especially aware of the consequences of micropolitics. The Irish men make few references to these, although they do refer to and value sponsors. Finally, some interviewees refer to homosocial patterns in the integration of men and women in these social networks and the negative impact of this on women's careers.

Micropolitics reflected in double standards in evaluation and related processes

Since universities are associated with meritocracy, we assume that selection processes are uninfluenced by the personal characteristics of the candidates. This is a key element in a bureaucratic model: with positions being assigned solely on the basis of qualifications and objectively assessed competence (Baldridge, 1971; Weber, 1947). However, studies have clearly demonstrated the existence of double standards in evaluation, i.e. the application of different criteria depending on the candidate's gender, their relationship with those making the decision, or the differential application of criteria (Foschi, 2006; Nielsen, 2016; Peterson, 2016; Ridgeway, 2011; Tomàs-Folch et al., 2010; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). There is increasing evidence (Nielsen, 2016; van den Brink, 2010) that structural processes for limiting the field of applicants exist and affect the outcomes in many universities. Thus, a very sizeable minority of professorial positions are not filled through open competition, but through a variety of procedures which ensure that effectively only one candidate is considered (for example, in disciplines such as science and technology: Nielsen, 2016). They include having very narrow criteria and having

totally open competitions only for very early (lecturer) and very late (i.e. full professorial) positions, as in the Irish case study. This structural strategy means that the only candidates for these positions are internal ones. Hence even where an inbreeding discourse does not exist, internal candidates may be structurally favoured.

There is evidence of a significant level of ‘inbreeding’ in the Spanish university system (Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez, 2010; Vazquez-Cupeiro and Elston, 2006) in what purports to be an open system. That model is based on social attitudes and unofficial and unwritten rules that each new member of the department should be selected from the members of the internal dominant group, rather than from other internal groups or from outside that university. This favours people who have studied or worked only (or mainly) in the department (Sánchez-Ferrer, 1996). The structural element of this is reflected in the following quote: ‘We have set up a system where the full professor can create a committee and this is obviously going to choose in-house people who have studied and worked in the university’ (ES, man, 23). Similarly, interviewee 09 refers to the exercise of internal power that perpetuates inbreeding: ‘It is the finger that indicates who will occupy an associate professor vacancy or who will occupy a chair. This is called the inbreeding system’ (ES, woman, 09). Thus, this unofficial convention and the organizational culture that has created it, ensures that most academic careers are spent in the same university (Cebreiro and San Segundo, 1998; Vazquez-Cupeiro and Elston, 2006). The most valued attribute is not excellence as reflected in the curriculum vitae but to be ‘a good colleague’ (Sánchez-Ferrer, 1996). Mobility between different institutions has not been considered important in the Spanish university system and this has been widely criticized. However, inbreeding still exists:

Choosing the in-house person is bad, obviously, that is inbreeding and should not be. But I also think that if they have been working, have been teaching, that also has to be evaluated. [...] I mean there are very few teachers who are able to say ‘Look, I will try to help with this, but if you do not fulfil your part, I am not going to make a vacancy for you’. There is also some affection that is created over time ‘Look, this boy does what he can, he has not got much but we cannot leave him in the street, right?’ Because our profession, doing a PhD thesis, after that you are not useful for many things. In a world and society such as ours, the Spanish, so closed-minded, it is not easy to find a job outside after having worked in the university many years. Then, what is it the easiest? Favoring the in-house person (ES, man, 23).

The above quote reveals conflicting attitudes to this system. The respondent criticizes it, but at the same time he justifies it, highlighting the work done by in-house candidates and suggesting that their selection should be viewed positively (Mora, 2001). The most extreme example of an inbred system occurs when selection boards become mere ‘public consecration ceremonies’ (i.e., when the successful candidate is identifiable before the selection process finishes); or where the board selects the candidate who is supported by the power holders in the department, even if he/she not objectively the best candidate (Nieto, 1984). Transparency is important (ETAN, 2000) but is perceived not to exist in both the Spanish and Irish organisations: ‘My experience is that the application of the criteria is not transparent’ (ES, man, 33); ‘It is never transparent’ (IE, woman, 10).

The perception of the evaluative context as one dominated by power, despite its apparent objectivity as reflected in individual scores for candidates (X and X, 2016) emerged in the Irish study: ‘So it’s my guess that the scores will bring in who they want to get promoted’ (IR, man, 04). This implicitly suggests the existence of a political rather than a bureaucratic model underpinning the evaluative process. As van den Brink and Benschop (2012: 509) argue ‘academic evaluations are not simply technical endeavours intended to measure the quality of academics; instead, they are political endeavours that involve negotiations between multiple actors’. In the Spanish university legislation there are rules governing the procedures for recruitment and selection of people to occupy the new positions offered. However, practices that seek to benefit some people over others are reflected in the framing of the job specification, in the composition of the evaluation committee or in the application of the rules.

There have been suggestions (Izquierdo et al., 2008) that ostensibly objective evaluative criteria were modified to support one candidate, and this is evident in the Spanish case study. In this way, people who are successful are those who are favoured by the members of the committee. For example, if one person has forty publications and the other person has twenty-two publications, the committee can decide that twenty or more publications deserve ten points. In this way, the second person is being helped by the committee and the objective difference between the two candidates on this criterion is eliminated. In the Irish study, the role of the chair is also seen as critical: ‘I mean obviously the chair will direct the way the meeting goes’ (IE, man, 02). There was also

an awareness of the importance of ties to members of the committee, with this being reflected in the framing of the job specification:

I've had first-hand experience and other anecdotal experience where people tailor the job spec to suit a certain individual who is maybe already in the job and just needs to be made permanent... all the criteria are pre-arranged... sometimes the internal candidate is favoured (IE, woman, 08).

Unlike the Spanish case this process is not seen as inevitably favouring the inhouse candidate. There is however occasional evidence of 'local logics' (Grummell et al., 2009) reflected in a concern with 'the alignment' of individuals' skills and talents (Chorn, 1991) with the relevant academic unit: 'Would they match?' (IE, woman, 07).

Gender inequalities appear when interviewees speak of the outcomes of recruitment/promotion: "The promotion situation is dire, it's flawed inside and out" (IE, woman, 28), noting the disparity in the numbers of men and women who were successful. For a minority of Spanish women, particularly those in non-STEM areas, gender inequality was perceived to exist and was reflected in the differential support for women on boards:

In matters of appointments, I see clearly that there is a preference for a man [...]. I know very valuable people who have struggled to be professors, very, very valuable people in this Faculty, and the chairs were obtained by men. And I know the curriculum vitae of each person, and from the objective point of view, it seems to me an injustice. But a chair is for a person that has five supports in a board, right? (ES, woman, 07).

Others note that: 'I know women who could be full professors on the basis of their merits and I think they are not [professors] simply because when they had to choose, they chose the man' (ES, women, 03). Similarly, Irish women refer to men with less merits being promoted over women, and say that women have to work harder and longer to achieve success: 'Women will say that. That you have to work longer and harder... to prove yourself better than a man... certainly men got promoted here who certainly were nowhere near [as good as] shall we say the women' (IE, woman, 01). The Irish women who were all in STEM, were more likely than their Spanish counterparts to refer to gender inequalities: with the minority of Spanish women who did refer to them being from a non-STEM environment-reflecting variation in the samples in the two contexts.

In summary, interviewees in both the Irish and Spanish case studies thought that double standards in evaluation exist and are used to facilitate the promotion of specific candidates: local ones in the Spanish case; men in the Irish case. Men in the Spanish context refer more openly than their Irish counterparts to such practices, arguably reflecting the strength of discourses other than merit in that context.

Conclusion

When we think of a university, we think of an institution that seeks to recruit the most qualified staff through purely objective processes: one where objectively assessed academic merit takes precedence as in the bureaucratic model. Thus, the implicit assumption is that the personal characteristics of the candidates are irrelevant. However, the interviewees in the Irish and Spanish universities perceive that micropolitical practices based on non-meritocratic criteria are used to benefit some candidates over others: reflecting the political model. Micropolitics is seen as the enactment of power, with the underlying model of power being a stealth one (Webb, 2008). Gender and inbreeding are seen as examples of micropolitics in action: reflecting wider societal and/or organisational power bases.

The interviewees allude to two subtopics within this focus on micro-politics. Firstly they highlight the role and influence of social networks, including sponsors. People who have these types of social relationships benefit in their academic careers. In addition, some interviewees perceive homosocial patterns in the integration of men and women in these social networks and these were seen to negatively impact on women's careers.

Secondly, interviewees in both the Irish and Spanish case studies emphasize the application of double standards and related processes in evaluation which are seen to impact on local candidates in the Spanish case; men in the Irish case. Men in the Spanish context refer more openly than their Irish counterparts to such practices, arguably reflecting the strength of the discourses of 'inbreeding' underpinned by loyalty and affection. The Irish women who are all in STEM are more likely to refer gender inequalities than their STEM counterparts in the Spanish study. However, a minority of

non-STEM Spanish women are very aware of the mechanisms that operate to benefit men's professional advancement against women.

Spanish men are more likely to refer to the effects of micropolitics in both areas than Irish men (with the exception of references to sponsors, which were equally likely to be made by Irish men). This could be a reflection of the fact that bases other than merit (and particularly 'in-breeding') is more acceptable in the Spanish context. This might well reflect the difference in the management systems in the two case study universities. Thus, in the collegial Spanish case, networks and double standards are effectively legitimated by collegial procedures. In the Irish study, managerial procedures attempt to limit micropolitics, particularly in the promotional system. However Irish men do refer to sponsors: relationships that seem to be very legitimate in both contexts. It is also worth noting that favouring the internal candidate is structurally legitimated by the exclusion of external candidates from competitions other than at the very start and end point of the academic hierarchy in the Irish case study university.

In this article we have highlighted (perceived) practices unrelated to the objective assessment of merit in two very different university systems: the Irish managerial and the Spanish collegial one. We found that micropolitics is perceived as a reality that has a crucial importance in promoting or limiting access to academic positions in both contexts. Thus, the informal structure of the university is perceived as impacting on its formal structure violating the principles of equality, transparency and merit ostensibly pursued by universities.

There are some methodological caveats. These results emerge from two studies that were carried out separately and with different samples. While only STEM disciplines were considered in Irish case study, all fields of knowledge were included in Spanish one. In addition, different questions were asked in each case and different methods of analysis were used. The perception that micropolitics existed and had an important impact on careers emerged unexpectedly and needs to be tested in other studies. Objective reality may be rather different.

Nevertheless, these results potentially undermine the 'rationalized myth' (Nielsen, 2016) of excellence as the defining characteristics of universities. A university cannot achieve real excellence without recruiting the most qualified people for each position. Practices that violate meritocracy cannot be accepted in organizations that aspire to

excellence. The existence of these perceived practices raises fundamental questions about the nature of the university and the possible limitations of governance changes since it implicitly suggests that these have little impact on interactional cultural realities (O'Connor et al., 2015). They suggest that the informal structure influences the formal structure, regardless of its governance model.

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